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Authors	Stringer, Adrian
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Adrian STRINGER

## **The Congregation as a Station for Social Integration: an Analysis of Congregants' Personal Networks with an Interpretation using Giddens' Theory of Structuration.**

**ABSTRACT:** This is a study of personal networks from a sample of two contrasting congregations in Northern Ireland: one is Anglican ('A'), historic and rural, the other newly formed, independent and evangelical ('I.E.'). This research helps to redress the lack of such studies in Britain and Ireland as compared to those in the USA. Using data from survey questionnaires and computer aided social network analysis, it investigates the role a congregation may have within such members' networks. The findings can be broken down into four sections. First, although a substantial proportion of co-congregants formed actors' networks, these did not form the majority of nodes. Second, Anglicans differed from the Independent Evangelical respondents in having networks of congregants who were, a) predominantly kin and b) more extensive in number. For the 'I.E.', the key integrative connections were provided by co-congregants. Third, congregants from both churches were primarily located within multiplex relationships – the people from their church were also either kin or already known through some other friendship group. Fourth, whilst each congregation can be differentiated from the other by social attributes (such as SEC, age, residency) such features appeared to be more that of induced homophily (local contexts and personal networks) rather than as a result of the simple agency of choice. Giddens' Structuration Theory was found to be a useful application for the theoretical animation of these results, especially in how the congregation acts as a station for congregants, integrating the household with the meso-level of social structure.

**KEYWORDS:** congregations, Northern Ireland, social network analysis, structuration, social structure, homophily

Adrian STRINGER is a Visiting Scholar, National University of Ireland, Maynooth (full time Minister in the Church of Ireland). Initial PhD research (University of Essex) explored the socio/structural contexts of four contrasting congregations in Northern Ireland. The research presented in this paper is a follow-up study of two of these congregations. These studies issue from an interest in understanding how religious congregations relate to material contexts.

## *Introduction*

This paper makes a contribution to the study of religious congregations in four ways. First, it simply adds to the sum of such studies, especially in the British Isles. For, whilst the study of the congregation receives continued attention in the U.S.A., this is not the case in the British Isles. This was found at the time of the author's earlier exploration into congregational studies (as noted by Guest Tusting and Woodhead 2004, xi) and can be seen in the eclipsing of small scale and infrequently produced congregational studies to date; where amalgams of denominational and whole population data dominate the research field (as in Davie's latest overview of the sociology of religion, 2015). The studies of congregations in the island of Ireland remain of marginal interest, with Ganiel's recent volume (2016) and Mitchell's overview (2006) forming some of the very few. As to why Irish and British congregational studies continue to be rare may be a consequence of funding opportunities. North American researchers have the benefit of financial support from such bodies as the Lily Foundation.

Second, conceptually the research published here is distinguished from much of its North American, British and Irish counterparts in its interest in the material context of congregational memberships (for a more detailed discussion of this see Stringer 2009 and 2016, 150-152). It builds upon an earlier study some fifteen years ago which examined four contrasting congregations in Northern Ireland. It approached these congregations in terms of their relationship to a range of material/socio-structural dimensions, including that of kinship, geographical location and socio-economic classification (SEC).

Third, whilst the previous research found that each congregation had its own distinctive material/socio-structural profile and that social networks such as that of kin appeared to play a significant role in the carrying of these properties; these were only paradigmatic observations. In order to establish whether there was such a link and what the nature of this association looked like – it was decided that a formal Social Network Analysis (SNA) would be the useful next step. (For an initial outline of the importance and study of networks in general, see Caldarelli and Catanzaro 2012.)

That the earlier study was only paradigmatic and used qualitative techniques is something that Everton's overview found to be common (2015: 22) – referring to Huang Ke-hsien 2014 as a North American example. Where quantitative data is used, it is frequently that of the correlation and logistical regression of data sets (often third-party) from national survey questionnaires (for example Frost and Edgel 2017; McClure 2013; Merino 2014; Seymour et al 2014; Stroope 2012). Although quantitative data analysis of congregations has been undertaken (Chaves 2004) this has not used formal SNA techniques.

Social network analysis in this work will be understood as 'a way of thinking about social systems that focus our attention on the relationships among the entities that make up the system, which we call actors or nodes. The nodes have characteristics – typically called 'attributes' – that distinguish among them...The relationship between nodes also have characteristics, and in network analysis we think of these as ties or links' (Borgatti Everett and Johnson 2013, 1-2). It may be useful at this point to clarify a few terms used in SNA. 'Actor' is used for the person being studied, the congregational member who agreed to be interviewed. In SNA terms, these congregants can also be referred to as 'ego'. The people to whom the ego/actor says that they are connected to are the 'alters'.

The exploration of congregational memberships picks up on two of the previous congregations studied, thereby allowing a direct development from the paradigmatic and qualitative findings to quantitative ones. It does so by examining the personal networks of a limited number of members from the Independent Evangelical congregation (which will be known as 'I.E.') and the Anglican ('A'). These contrast with one another in terms of their age ('I.E.' relatively newly formed at the time of the Good Friday agreement in 1998, 'A' a historic congregation in 1868); setting ('I.E.' city, 'A' rural) and tradition (contemporary evangelical versus Anglican). It will seek to establish the extent to which co-congregants share these personal networks. As such, this provides us with the first of the research interests: (i) An exploration into the degree to which congregants are present in personal networks.

There is also curiosity in finding out who is most central in these networks, both in terms of their centrality as integrated nodes within each set of ego-nets (closeness of alters to one another), and who (congregants or non-congregants) are the most prominent in these networks (that is, closeness of alter to ego, as calculated in terms of the most frequent of interactions – in the interview, who ego talked, chatted with, most of the time). The second research interest is therefore: (ii) To assess if and to what extent, congregants form a central component within members' personal networks.

Furthermore, there is that of the modal closeness of ego-alter relationships as ego interacts with alter in more than one context (say being kin as well as congregant); referred to here as multiplex, in contrast to a simplex network connectivity, thus providing us with the question: (iii) Are congregants located within sets of multiplex network structures?

Next, there is the closeness within ego-nets in terms of homophily. Homophily is the tendency for people to gravitate or mix with those who are similar. McPherson has written widely on this subject: 'homophily is the principle that a contact between similar people occurs at a higher rate than among dissimilar people' (Miller McPherson et al. 2001, 416). The

homophilic attributes examined here include those of kinship, educational experience and qualifications, SEC, gender, age and residency. It will therefore be necessary to examine the degree of these similarities on a number of dimensions: within and between congregations in members responses to the survey questionnaire; in the SNA study of the alters within each of the twenty-six personal networks; as an amalgam of all alters from each congregation; and between these sets of results and the benchmark of N.I. as a whole. The final research interest is therefore: (iv) Exploration of potential homophily.

To conclude, there is a brief attempt at imagining (in the Wright Mills sense, 2000) of what these findings could mean for how congregations operate within the wider social system. This is deemed helpful for a number of reasons. Although sociologists of religion do acknowledge to some degree the role of material contexts for the life of congregations, these are eclipsed by what becomes the effective driver for the ontology of the congregation - religious beliefs. An example of this can be found in Davie's recent overview of religion in Britain (2015), Ganiel's exploration into emerging congregations in Ireland (2016) and the Rational Choice model which has a dominant place within the sociology of religion in North America (as Stark and Bainbridge 1985). The result of this imbalance is an agency led understanding of the congregation at the expense of any socio/structural understandings.

As a consequence, the paper here offers an opportunity to draw together a range of factors affecting congregational dynamics into one comprehensive theory. Something which, even when material factors are taken seriously such as SEC, is rarely attempted (as noted in the treatment of socio-economic-classification, Stringer, 2016; 150-152).

In addition, using a meta-theory to hang the findings here upon, it also provides somewhere to place the particular interest in social networks. For, alongside the neglect of SNA in any theoretical studies of congregations, there is a corresponding absence of how social networks may play a role in any theoretical overview of the societal life cycle of the congregation.

In response to the above, the findings produced here will be uploaded into one pre-existing meta-theory of society. It is a theory which articulates the saliency of both agency and structure - that of Giddens' structuration (as found in his 'Constitution of Society', 1984) - and in particular the aspect of the 'station'.

In a similar way to Bourdieu's conceptualization of 'habitus' (1986), Giddens' describes how within society there are 'stations'. These are the 'locales' the physical places such as a school (135), or in our case a church in which social encounters take place. Such 'stations' occur in the 'regionalization' (119, 121) of time and space into zones whereby bundles of activities occur (116) and actors come together into what Giddens

describes as 'co-presence' (123). Altogether, the 'station' and the actors within it, are both agents and subjects of the processes of structuration, with both freedom and restraint due to the system's structural 'packing' which occurs within such stations (116) – a packing which operates within the opportunities and restraints of the relevant social context.

The dimension of time is a further element within Giddens' conceptualization, marking as it does the contingent nature of such 'stations'. Consequently, 'stations' are 'black boxes' (134) in time geography illustrating the movement from one social 'bundle' to another.

Giddens' 'station' motif will be used in the Discussion section of this paper to illustrate how the findings point to how congregations emerge, persist and decline in relation to the ebb and flow of a range of social systemic factors.

However, before we turn to the fieldwork of this study, it is important to note its limitations. Although this is an investigation into what networks or social-space properties congregants may have; it is a limited examination into just two congregations amongst many, many more across Northern Ireland and indeed beyond. Neither is this an attempt to provide a representative sample. Instead it is a small-scale study and although of contrasting types of congregation they are nevertheless a) both Christian b) of similar form (gathered together on Sunday in a designated building with family units as their default building blocks); and c) of similar ethnicity and social standing.

## *Methods*

The first step in the investigation was to obtain basic demographic information from the congregational gatekeepers. This data created a thumb-nail sketch of their members' age, gender and frequency of attendance at main acts of worship. No names were needed or used for this exercise. This sketch enabled a comparison with the short questionnaire returns.

This questionnaire was distributed by the gatekeepers to all members of the two congregations. Members were asked about basic personal demographics such as age, gender, ethnicity, marital status and socio-economic-classification. Further questions were asked about respondents' residency (location and time lived there, details about accommodation), understanding of their own social class and their congregational affiliation (where, with whom, how often and origins of association). Data from this survey was primarily analysed in terms of percentage comparisons – within and between congregations and with the N.I. population as a whole.

The third exercise required face-to-face interviews. Whole network investigations were not judged to be feasible. Volunteers for interview were sought by the gatekeeper. A total of twenty-six respondents completed the interviews, thirteen from each of the congregations. To ensure that the respondents reflected their respective congregations, their attributes were checked against the gatekeepers' membership profiles.

The name generator exercise chosen to elicit the ego-networks was based on Hogan et al. 2007. The exercise involved using an A3 piece of paper which was laid in front of each respondent. On this were marked two large concentric circles. Respondents were then asked to name the people whom they talk, chat, converse with, a lot of the time (the innermost circle), some of the time (the middle of the circles) or a little of the time (the outermost circle). Additional information was requested by the respondent for each of their alters: the respondent's estimate of their alter's age; how long they had known them (in years or 'all of my life'); how they knew them (for example at work, or from their congregation or through another group or by kinship connection); and whether the alter belonged to their own current congregation.

Having created a series of ego-alter names, the next part of the interview sought alter-to-alter relationships. One at a time, each of the alters was selected and asked whether they talked, chatted or conversed with any of the other alters in ego's personal network. Data from the SNA exercise went through various processes. Most were entered into Microsoft Excel spreadsheets. These created either one mode adjacency matrices (see Crossley et al. 2015, 9) for alter-to-alter responses or two mode affiliation matrices for the lodgement of alters' properties. These properties included items such as age and congregational affiliation. From this were generated percentage tables cross tabulating congregants and non-congregants as against the complete range of properties investigated in the network exercise.

The UCINET program (Borgatti 2002) was used for the social network analysis, including the transposition of these initial two mode matrices into those which needed to be in a one mode format only.

One-mode adjacency matrices were pasted into the UCINET program for a range of analyses. Using the visualising NETDRAW program, sociograms were produced for each respondent network. A sociogram (or sometimes called 'graph' or 'map') is the visual representation of the connections the respondents recall with other people ('alters') and between alters. In the sociogram the alters appear as large dots (known as nodes) with lines (termed vectors) drawn between them for where there is connectivity. These sociograms provide instant visual comparisons, showing for example, a social network which is densely connected between the nodes so that the graph forms a unitary whole. Alternatively, it may be one which is composed of several distinct sections, sometimes looking like

a bow-tie, thereby showing how the respondent is familiar with separate groups of people. By also identifying where the congregational members are in the sociogram, it can be seen whether the congregation, say, encompasses the whole ego network, or instead is just one part. These adjacency matrices were also analysed as to the number of ties and their cohesiveness (density).

A further UCINET tool generated an Eigenvector Centrality Score. This takes a node and the algorithm calculates how central that is in relation to the total strength or weight of connections which all adjacent nodes hold (Borgatti et al. 2013, 168). We can view this as a measure of the popularity of the most popular of alters within each personal network – together with the opportunity of identifying who these popular figures are within the ego-net. Eigenvector Centrality is also regarded as a more accurate assessment of this kind of centrality (Prell 2012, 101). This and other centrality measures are ways of assessing the connectivity of networks whatever their total number of nodes – thereby providing a comparison between different sizes of network.

The next question is that of who else can be found towards the core of these networks – and who would lie at the periphery? In the context of this research, would these be members of the respondent's congregation or non-congregants; or perhaps a mixture of both? To assess this, a Core/Periphery (UCINET) procedure was undertaken for all ego-networks which was then followed by a K-Core Analysis. Whilst the Core/Periphery indicates which alters are central, the K-Core procedure gives a more sophisticated break-down of the networks into concentric cores revealing where all alters lie in relation to one another. This provides a greater understanding of which kinds of nodes are located at the centre of the network and incrementally further away from it. The content of these cores was distinguished according to their sources; kin only, congregation only, kin and congregation and any other (such as work, neighbour, school or college friend and all others).

These K-Core categories were then investigated further using the Quadratic Assignment Procedure (QAP). This analysed the results in terms of their statistical significance; that is, whether these source categories were likely or unlikely to be generated according to randomness and therefore whether they could be judged to be statistically significant findings or not.

## *Findings*

### **(i) An Exploration into the Degree to which Congregants are Present in Personal Networks.**



Congregants were found to form a substantial part of all members' networks, although not the majority of all nodes. It was rare for a respondent from either congregation to have networks with people who were predominantly from their own congregation. Averaging for the whole congregations, the mean of same-church interactions amongst the Independent Evangelical was less than half of all aggregated ego-nets at 40%; whilst that for the Anglican sample it was 30% (and as noted below, these were primarily familial).

## **(ii) To Assess If and to what Extent Congregants Form a Central Component within Members' Personal Networks**

The Eigenvector Centrality measures show us that the alter at the epicentre of networks in 'I.E.' and 'A' (usually ego's spouse) is similar in its level of connectivity at 0.391 and 0.334 respectively. However, when looking beyond the most central node, to that of the most central set of nodes; K-Core analysis reveals a picture of great difference between the two congregations. On the one hand the Anglican respondents record high levels of kin who are also congregants – (both of their own household or outside of it, as parents, siblings, cousins and other extended family members) – but a lower proportion of congregants who are non-kin. Whilst only twelve percent of the innermost core of 'A's respondent networks are those alters made from the congregation itself, a much higher percentage of these innermost alters are neither congregants nor kin, but 'other' (thirty nine percent). These 'others' are neighbours, fellow farmers and work colleagues. The 'I.E.' respondents include a much higher proportion of congregationally made alters (40%) and correspondingly fewer non-household kin and those who fall within the 'other' category. 'I.E.' also has ego-nets with a higher proportion of central alters (as defined by having the highest Eigenvector Centrality Scores) who are congregants than those found within 'A' (12/13 and 10/13 respectively).

This innermost core is not only qualitatively different between the congregations, it is also quantitatively different. The 'I.E.' innermost K-Core ranges from its lowest number at three degrees, highest at nine (mean 5.9); whereas 'A's range from five to nineteen degrees (with a mean of 8.5). The Independent Evangelical cores are less extensive than their Anglican counterparts.

It is this level of integration which appears to be the significant difference – not the simple presence of who exists within respondents' networks. This greater degree of integration within 'A' ego-nets as compared to the 'I.E.' is reflected in their relative densities. The greater-integrated 'A' sample's aggregate ego-net density was found to have a mean of 0.554. This compared with the smaller density of 'I.E.' at 0.330. The proportion of kin within the innermost core of ego-nets is similar, for respondents record comparable levels of interaction (45% of alters who are

spoken, chatted with 'often' are those of kin for 'A' and fifty one percent for 'I.E.'. Nuclear families and extended kin are important to both sets of networks, where they differ is the role they play within their networks. In 'A' congregants play a prominent part as an integrating component of their networks – but only in as much as they are also kin. Within 'I.E.' networks, integration is provided by congregants, and beyond the household these are not kinship based, but are congregants who have been encountered through the congregation itself. This is a key finding, for the 'I.E.' congregation seems to be playing a significant role in the connection of their households to the meso-level integrated grouping of the congregation. In contrast, integration of 'A' alters are within the extended family and other dimensions of the local community (neighbours, farmers, work colleagues). These patterns would suggest a) amorphously shaped networks ('A') where kin and friends of kin are highly interrelated without many structural 'holes' to separate them into sub-groups (see Granovetter 1982); and b) the greater separation of ego-nets into components where extended kin aren't necessarily integrated within the congregation ('I.E'). This pattern can be recognised between the sociograms for each congregation, where the Independent Evangelical is formed of clearly defined components, but the Anglican is not.

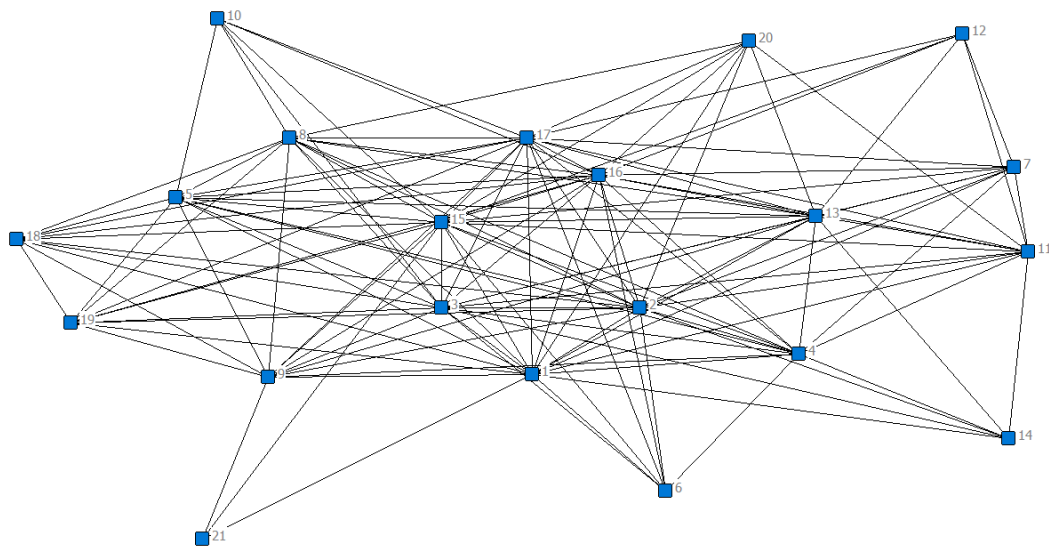


Figure 1, Personal Network of an 'A' Respondent

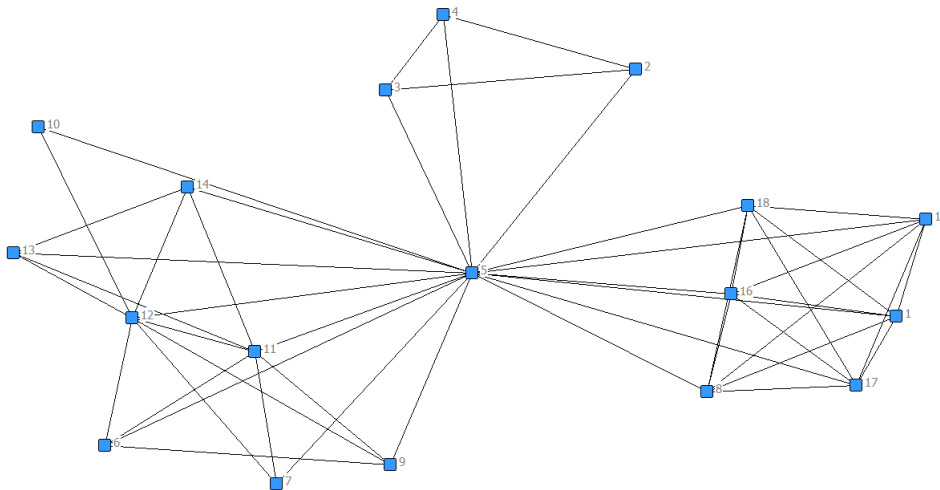


Figure 2, Personal Network of an 'I.E.' Respondent

### (iii) Are Congregants Located within Sets of Multiplex Network Structures?

Yes, both survey and SNA data confirm that members' relationship to fellow congregants go beyond that of their shared membership. This is a multiplex relationship in many forms; although the outstanding layering of connection being that fellow congregants are also kin. The survey questionnaire provided respondents with a list of different kinds of people who could have been present the last time they attended a regular act of worship. 80% of 'I.E.' respondents and 90% of those from 'A' referred to a family member of some kind. The differences between the two congregations was that of which type of kin. The 'I.E.' returns appeared to be primarily household, typically children and spouses. Non-household kin were more of a feature of the Anglican membership which found that 64% of respondents noted that (adult) siblings, parents, grandparents, aunts and cousins were also present at their last regular act of worship (in contrast with the relatively lower rate of 20% of 'I.E.' respondents).

The survey also asked respondents about their congregational introduction. These results also confirmed the presence of multiplex congregational relationships with the overwhelming majority referring to how they had first attended in the company of someone else – someone whom they knew beyond the congregation itself. Very few came to the congregation without such pre-existing connectivity (just 7% of 'I.E.' and 3% of 'A' respondents). Again, most prominent of these multiplex relationships were kin: 29% of 'I.E.' members came with another member of their family or spouse, whilst the rate for 'A' was almost all of the members at 94%.

The highest proportion of multiplex co-congregants amongst the 'I.E.' were identified as those who had accompanied them as schismatics from another church (44% of all 'I.E.' respondents), with just 2% being simply one of their friends.

Turning from the survey data of congregants, to that of respondents' social networks, 57% of 'I.E.' congregational networks were found to be multiplex in terms of kin with 'A' registering an even greater rate at 70%. These results run in parallel with the general findings of a high incidence of kinship amongst all alters, whether congregants or not (33% of all 'I.E.' alters are kin, as are 39% of 'A' alters).

The prominence of kinship within the networks of respondents from both congregations is a feature of many of the findings. It is calculated that all respondents (100%) who share their home with someone else (that is, living with either a spouse, child or both), are attached in some way to the same congregation. If one belongs, all belong, whether that be an 'I.E.' or 'A' household. This points to congregational allegiances lying at the most basic of levels of social structures; the household.

Although relatively few, there are other forms of multiplex relationships and these are similarly replicated amongst both sets of congregants. There are some who have known their fellow congregants as parents of children who attend the same school, a friendship often described as occurring at the school gate (5% for both congregations). Also similar between 'I.E.' and 'A' are congregants whose origin lies in having met at another organization or a previous congregation (5% 'A', 8% 'I.E.'). There are also those congregants who are known from their own attendance at school or university. Whilst this is only recorded by 3% of 'A' respondents, the incidence within the 'I.E.' sample is over four times that, at 14%. Similarly, only 1% of 'A' multiplex congregational connections are also those from work, but 11% for the 'I.E.' sample. Whereas none of the 'I.E.' ego networks are multiplex in terms of congregation and neighbourhood, a small number are indicated as such by the 'A' interviewees.

This produces a picture of 'A' congregants being overwhelmingly introduced to their congregation by either marrying into it or being brought to church by their parents as a child. Away from that initial introduction the extended family is a significant presence at worship and within their personal networks. Alongside are a small number of fellow congregants whom they have known from the local school and as neighbours.

'I.E.' on the other hand, whilst also having a high rate of household family members present at their worship and as part of their personal networks (usually spouses and children); although their extended families are present as alters, they are not part of their congregation. Introduced to their congregation as part of the group who left their previous church, or

with household kin, new friends from the church became an important part of their personal networks.

#### **(iv) Exploration of Potential Homophily.**

In this sub-section different alter properties will be examined to assess the degree to which there is, or is not, a sharing of attributes within the congregational membership and within members' personal networks.

As already described above, propinquity through kinship was found to have a prominent and central position within congregant's personal networks. Kinship, therefore, is a strongly homophilous dimension within both congregational memberships, although of different kinds between them ('I.E.' nuclear, 'A' extended). It is important to emphasise at this point that these differences are not because there are great variations in the proportion or frequency of ego's kinship connections within either set of networks – on the contrary they are remarkably similar. The difference of kinship connections is essentially that of the nature of how they are or are not members of their respective congregations.

There was no obvious shared level of educational qualifications by the 'A' congregants. Instead the Anglican members broadly reflected the pattern of qualifications held by the general population of the province. However, a different picture emerged amongst the Independent Evangelical congregants. Whereas the benchmark for the highest level of qualifications (level 1: first degree, or equivalent, and above) in the N.I. Census was 27% – as also held by the 'A' sample (27%) – 'I.E.' returned a very high proportion of members qualified at this highest level (86%).

Some explanation for the differences between these two sets of congregants can be explained in terms of geographical location: the area in which 'A' congregants reside record a lower level of educational attainment than that of their 'I.E.' counterparts (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency 2012, 27). It is difficult to assess whether this educational profiling of the congregations is a further reflection of the general connectivity of respondents because such questions were not directly asked during the SNA exercise. However, the higher proportion of professional alters (such as senior managers, teachers, nurses, consultants) in 'I.E.' personal networks suggests that this could well be the case.

Even with these factors taken into account, there still appears to be an over-representation of higher level educational attainers amongst the 'I.E.' congregation – a dimension which research frequently finds to be a critical factor in personal network structure (as noted by Moore 1990, 733, also Bidart et al. 2018, 10).

However, the issue still remains as to whether this feature is directly attributable to the agency of members (that is, drawn to their congregation because members are of a similar educational level as themselves) or alternatively, as a consequence of some other extra-congregational factor.

This could be, for instance, the dislocation of students from their working-class neighbourhoods to new areas, both sociologically and geographically (mobility to a new location). Indeed, such interpretations are extant: it can be found within the tradition of conversion studies, especially in the context of student changing religion at the point of attending university away from home (as noted by Snow and Machalek 1984).

As with the educational qualification profiling; the survey data of SEC for the 'A' membership broadly followed that of the 2011 Northern Ireland Census - although with some over-representation of the middle ranges of SEC at the expense of the lower ones. 'A' alters similarly followed this same general profile.

A degree of homophily could be seen between the 'A' respondents (who were of higher SEC standing than the rest of their congregational counterparts) and their non-kin fellow congregants (who could similarly be ranked as above average SEC). Caution is needed, however, because of the number of alters in question being so small (just 20 of all alters - 68% of the economically active alters).

The 'I.E.' survey results were markedly different. 81% of those who completed the questionnaires were recorded as being Level 1: managers and professionals (in contrast with 26% of the 2001 N.I. Census). This mirrors the high proportion of 'I.E.' who hold the highest level of qualifications; creating a sketch of a congregation which relate to the professionals of the area - teachers, lecturers, dentists and higher-ranking managers.

While the whole congregation may share high levels of SEC, the replication of this within personal networks, whilst still over-representing the higher SEC levels, was not to the same extent. Level 1 SEC was at a lower rate of 53% amongst all 'I.E.' alters and 57% of the non-kin congregational ones. This opens-up a possible scenario that whilst the whole congregation may be of the highest-level SEC, this may not necessarily be a direct consequence of agency selection, but instead be an indirect effect by some other factor, such as that of the geographical and social mobility of its members.

Although survey results show that for both congregations there is some broad following of the baseline Provincial distribution of ages, there is nevertheless some skew away from the younger age groups (16-29 years) with a corresponding over-representation of the middle to later ages (45-74 years). This is a pattern replicated in many churches (as noted by Arweck and Beckford 2012, 360-361). It is possible that this may be a common generic association, reflecting the current cohort due to the age-cycle effects of both a younger age group as it moves away from home but have not yet settled down and started a family, together with the oldest age group reflecting its general social isolation.

Survey results showed that the over-representation of the mid-range age groups was particularly pronounced amongst the I.E. membership, registering 50% percent in the 45-59 age grouping. This could be the ageing of the prominent and younger cohort of 30-44 years of age at the time of the earlier 2004 survey when members of that age group had recently split away from their previous church.

The SNA exercise, on the other hand, showed a particular trend towards homophily where the ages of the egos were reflected in the over-representation of those ages amongst their respective alters. Amongst all 'I.E.' alters, 53% shared the same age grouping (that is, within the alter being a maximum of seven years from that of their respective ego). Similarly, when selecting for the non-kin congregational alters, the rate of ego/alter age-group correspondence was exactly the same as for the total alters (53%). 'A' alters were likewise representative of their own ego's age (52%), although with a slightly higher incidence of similar age grouping of non-kin congregational alters at 64% (which can be accounted for by the elimination of ego's own children in the latter sample).

When comparing congregational alters and non-congregational alters; age does not appear to be a significant factor of differentiation for either 'I.E.' nor 'A' ego-nets. For both sets of personal networks (outside their family groups) people are drawn to those of a similar age. The conclusion here is that although homophily of age is to some extent a feature of personal networks (as noted above); the survey results showing that age is not an outstanding feature directly relating to either form of membership.

The survey data showed no particular association of either congregation with gender ('A' 45%, 55% female; 'I.E.' 51% male, 49% female). This contrasted with the results from the SNA exercise which showed a close association of gender between egos and alters. 81% of all 'I.E.' non-kin respondents' alters were the same gender as their respective egos and 90% of all non-kin 'A' alters were the same gender as their respective respondents. Nevertheless, neither gender nor age alignment of egos with their alters should be attributed to the special effects of congregational attachment: both phenomena have for many decades been observed as some of the common features of the forces of homophily within society as a whole (see McPherson et al. 2001, 417).

With 'A' respondents primarily identifying themselves as British (71%) – which is at a higher rate than what would be expected province-wide (40% according to the 2011 N.I. Census, and similar to the 'I.E. rate of 43% of respondents identifying themselves as British); it could be concluded that this British identification may be a special property of this particular congregation. However, instead of identifying the congregation as the independent source of this preference; it could be a further consequence of generic ascription. These congregants are born into British-identifying

extended and interlocking family groups and it is this induced homophily which is a recognised phenomenon in the reproduction of sectarianism in Northern Ireland (see Tourney, 2012).

The survey results also show an over-representation of Northern Irish identity amongst 'I.E.' members compared with those from 'A'. Whilst this could be a sign of a congregational reaction against the British/Irish polarization in the Province; it may instead be a country-wide, not congregationally-driven phenomenon, as younger more educated people in Northern Ireland prefer such N.I. identification (as noted by Bull, 2006).

That 'I.E.' returns a higher level of identities classed as 'Other' rather than that of British, Northern Irish or Irish in the survey – as compared to their counterparts in 'A' (7% to 0% respectively); it may be tempting to conclude that there could be some special degree of closeness of the 'I.E.' congregation to communities of migrants. However, according to the N.I. 2011 Census (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 'National Identity'), the areas that 'I.E.' members reside already register 5% and those of 'A' at 3%; which means these figures look more like variations on the Province-wide data than any significant aspect of independent congregational homophily.

Egos and their alters also shared connections through work, whilst attending school or university, third-party connections through their own children (notably that of the school gate at drop-off and collection times) and as neighbours. However, none of these properties were striking in their rates of return; neither could they form any significant distinguishing feature between the two congregations. Instead the connectivity rates were found to be similar.

Nor was there found to be any significant proportion of ego's alters sourced from their own neighbourhood; with only 2% of all 'I.E.' alters being so derived and 6% for 'A'. Likewise, an examination of the survey data revealed that residential location was not either an outstanding feature of congregants' attributes. For, although both sets of memberships showed some attachment to their locality (with 'I.E.' returning 74% of their members showing that they had lived in their current homeplace for five or more years, and 'A' at a rate of 98%); these figures should not on their own lead us to any conclusion that there is any particular dimension of residential homophily within either set of congregational memberships. This is because in Northern Ireland as a whole, the general population also recorded similar results for rates of residency of five years or more. (Northern Ireland Social Attitudes Survey, 1996).

However, before that association of period of residency and congregational affiliation is left completely behind; a caveat needs to be added. These survey findings are, of course, limited to the questions that are asked. This restricted respondents to thinking about 'the town or village



where you live now'. The question does not seek to find out if they had moved within that 'town or village'. The earlier study which preceded this research showed that 'I.E.' congregants had indeed experienced relatively short-distance residential movement within the urban area that they lived in (Stringer, 2009, 193). For the respondents in this earlier study, such localised moves were of great significance; although still within a brief car journey away from their childhood home-place, they had nevertheless moved to a socially different part of their urban area (Stringer 2009, 246).

An assessment of homophily is about comparison and therefore what each congregation is compared with. From the survey results the two memberships certainly differ between each other according to SEC, educational attainment and identities. Whilst these findings may tempt one into a conclusion that each congregation attracts certain types of people (birds of a feather flock together); there are other results which question such a conclusion. This is because each membership is drawn from already distinct geographical and sociological contexts which give rise to such differences – in other words these may well be induced (given, rather than those of agent's independently chosen) properties. Differences of education, mobility, identity and SEC, can be contextualised according to local geographies (in short, upwardly mobile urban versus static and rural). Where there is choice homophily (gender and age preferences amongst the non-kin alters of the SNA findings) these contrast with those of the congregational survey results and therefore appear to reflect agents' general choices rather than being that relating specifically to the congregation itself.

Contextual comparisons of potentially homophilous properties has not therefore yielded any clear picture of homophily. An alternative investigation can be made on a purely statistical level by using computer-run statistical significance. This is an assessment between the data and the chances of such data being generated randomly. UCINET's Multiple Regression Quadratic Appraisal Procedure (QAP) Via Double Dekker Semi-Partialling (see Borgatti, Everett and Freeman 2002), was used which ran the data against 2000 random permutations. This procedure issued in 'P' scores out of a possible one (which would be one hundred percent chance of a random score, to less than one as the probabilities of such data simply by randomness alone). It used the two congregations as the dependent variables and a series of results from the K-Core Analysis as the independent variables (showing proportions of alter sources as being either: only kin, kin who are also congregants, congregants only and others).

The presence of kin within the networks of all respondents yielded an insignificant (that is, results which are than likely to be produced by randomness alone) score of 0.38981. However, the integrative multiplex relationship of kin and congregation was found to be a significant

association for the 'A' set of results, with a P value of 0.03298. A second positive and significant score was given again for another, although contrasting integrative feature. This was for the set of 'I.E.' alters whose relationship to ego was limited to that of the congregation alone (0.00150). These significant results correspond exactly to the distinguishing characteristics of each of the two congregations: 'A' with their kin and congregation multiplex networks and second with 'I.E.' as those with friends who had been made through the congregation itself.

Furthermore, the integrity of an 'A'/'I.E.' contrasting forms of membership (congregational kin/friends made through the congregation) was underscored with the QAP R-Square result of 0.06168. Thus, whilst homophily was found to be at best questionable (as a simple comparison between the memberships) and induced (an association with local geographies); the integrative factors of kinship in 'A' and friends made through 'I.E.' were in contrast, of clear statistical significance.

Cumulatively, these findings generate a picture of memberships whose attributes appear to differentiate them, but only when the structural context of which members are already immersed, is ignored. Once these are taken into account (their local context and personal networks), then the congregational membership no longer looks to be any more than an extension of induced homophily; one which articulates the micro, meso and macro social contexts to which members already belong.

What does differentiate and model the two congregations from each other, and the social structure of which they form - is the integrative function which each congregation operates. QAP analysis reveals that for the 'A' membership there is an integration of extended kin alongside many other kinship groups who form a patchwork of distinct but interrelated families. On the other hand, the 'I.E.' congregation provides (and creates) an integration of disparate groups of household members together with small groups of friends whom they have made through the congregation itself. Ethnographically (from the earlier study), an expression of this difference could be seen in the lack of congregational activity in 'A' but a series of regularly meeting and intimate house groups in 'I.E.' (Stringer 2009, 147).

## *Discussion*

The data and findings of this research will now be briefly set alongside that Giddens' conceptual framework of 'structuration' in general and of 'the station' in particular.

First, the station is a located entity. Ethnographic observations and discussions with members of both churches showed how important

physical place was to them. 'I.E.' is a new organization looking to invest congregants' money into the purchase of their own building. Equally, 'A' members also spend large sums in the maintenance of their historic place of worship. Sacred spaces and religious activity have a long and accepted association, wherever that may occur (see Holm and Bowker 1994). Giddens' theory of regionalization calls for an examination of the ways in which spaces are delineated. In the metaphor of the station, this would be between the offices behind the screen where staff take payments, differentiated from the foyer where customers queue up to make their payments, or with digitally orientated stations, where the customers meet few personnel – reflecting the growing impersonalization and automation of contemporary society. Applying this to worship spaces, the 'A's traditional cruciform layout of the worship area, with its hierarchical procession from nave to chancel to sanctuary, reflects the class divided society in which this church was built (the mid nineteenth century, during which Marx gave his critique of western industrial society) together with the preceding monarchical period during which the Anglican denomination was founded. In contrast, that of 'I.E.' is inclusive, with the seating in 'the round' and no fixed position for any worship leader or preacher. (For British discussions of worship area designs see Giles 1999; the wider issue of the ordering of space, Lash and Urry 1994; the decline in Anglican status, see Coxon and Towler 1979; and on the subject of the general informality of mass society see Myszal 2000.)

Frequently in the sociological studies of congregations, the physical space where members gather is largely ignored (for example Ammerman's American 2001 study and Ganiel's Irish review in 2016). Alongside the physical, there is also that of the sociological location. Following the railway station motif, this would be the shared properties of those who come and use the station, for instance commuters living near-by who share similar educational, occupational, material and ethnic identities. In Giddens' terms this is the 'locale' (1984, 119) of the station. Beyond Giddens this has been referred to as socio-dynamic or 'Blau-Space' (for example McPherson and Ranger-Moore 1991) where sociological properties are closely associated with each other. In the two congregations studied here, both displayed various forms of induced homophily, such as kinship (in 'A') and SEC ('I.E.').

Another dimension of location within structuration is that of time as well as that of space. Just as stations are places of busyness and change, so too the metaphor can be applied to the congregation. Both congregations showed great dynamism in the change of its membership. As with any group of people, in churches there is a turn-over of membership as new members are born and received into church and pass away using the appropriate rites of passage. In addition to these changes there is the coming and going of peoples as they choose to either join the congregation

or leave it – in accord with the metaphor of the railway station. Gatekeepers from both congregations noted how there had been, between the earlier project of several years ago and the later one researched here - significant change in membership. 'I.E.' had fallen by 11%, 'A' increased 38%. The Independent Evangelical was formed as a schismatic group, thereby fixing it to one episode in time. Since then smaller groups had joined, but other sub-groups within the congregation had left for other churches. The Gatekeeper explained that it was a continuous and uphill battle to bring in new people as other existing members left. In contrast, 'A' benefitted from disgruntled parishioners leaving from a near-by church, choosing to move to them by virtue of existing (primarily kinship) connections. The temporality at the micro scale with the supply of new members together with the ever-changing shift of outside, meso-level connectivity (agencies and groups which form the sociological context in which the congregation is set); these create a fluidity which has momentous consequences for congregations. There is a long history of such association in congregational studies, as in Kincheloe 1970, Pope 1942 and Wickham 1957.

Second, the station is a great place for connectivity, or 'co-presence' as Giddens calls this). For example, there is the movement of commuters to the city for work and bringing people into the area to service their commuter's families to clean and provide child-care.

There are two ways in which congregations connect people. First, there are the internal connections within the congregations themselves. This was the main finding of the study, with QAP analysis revealing significant association between each of the congregations and various forms of social integration. This is another way in which the congregations are, in Giddens' terms, acting in the process of structuration. The structuring of the congregation includes meso-level connectivity, whether that be to other similar congregations, such as with a parish to its Diocese, or to other agencies and groups such local governmental and non-governmental bodies as they co-operate in shared community projects (for example Stringer 2009, 224-243).

But, as the railway station motif articulates, this is not necessarily a stand-alone integration, with the congregation selecting people for membership. Instead it is an integration in the context of connections which already exist. In Giddens this is the regionalization of time and space wherein there is both the freedom and restraint of structural 'packing' (Giddens, 1984:116). In the railway station motif, this is the shared sociological properties of station users, and therefore an induced form of homophily. Likewise, in the congregation the connectivity of the household unit was found to be the key building block within both sets of congregations. Membership in 'A' also functions as an integrator of inter-connected sets of extended kinship groups. While 'I.E.' shows how the

congregation can be a place in which social integration is accomplished through the creation of new connections; turning brief encounters to longer-standing friendships. In both types of integration, it opens-up the potential for meso-level social support, reminiscent of the 'convoy' concept used in social work (as found in Antonucci, Ajrouch and Birditt 2014).

Third, that of purpose. This can be drawn from the metaphor by pushing it into that of passenger destinations; with the station acting as a conduit for extra-congregational connections including that - of a shared purpose between members. That it is appropriate to place religious congregations within Giddens' structuration theory is particularly clear when considering his concept of interaction and routinization - those which he regards as being vital to the whole thesis (1984, 60-72). Typically, this will be when people come together (Giddens' concept of co-presence) at moments of crises in agents' life cycles. This includes time of birth, marriage, death and many others which lie between them: '(they) employ special forms of fixed equipment - formalized arrangements of chairs and so on...while a pattern of conduct tends to be recognized' (1984, 71). When they do so, Giddens argues, they address common existential questions - thereby touching another function of the gathering of members (1984, 87).

### *Concluding Comments*

This research has contributed to the relatively scarce number of investigations into religious congregations produced outside the USA - particularly those using social network analysis. It has examined the relationship of memberships within and beyond themselves. It has discovered the fundamental relationship of members to (i) the household and (ii) integration of these households into the meso-level connections of the congregation - whether these be of historic extended kinship networks or that offered by that of a newly formed congregation. The homophilic dimensions of such interfaces were found to be primarily induced - a consequence of extra-congregational dimensions such as that of kinship or the traits of the socially dislocated professional.

By placing these findings within Giddens' Structuration Theory, a structural interpretation of congregational memberships has been produced showing them as stations by which the household can be socially integrated into the meso levels of social structure.

This willingness to view congregations as at least in part, a social construct, is to offer an alternative approach to those who see religious congregations as independent of the social system, as entities in their own right; that is, that religious entities exist sui generis. This argument is evident in what must be one of the most comprehensive studies of congregations published to date: Ammerman's 'Congregation and

Community'. The belief that religious organizations are independent from wider social forces is stated quite openly (Ammerman 2001, 354): 'Congregations are not best described as merely the product of individual choices. They are social realities *sui generis*'.

So too, Arweck and Beckford's recent overview of recent British studies, appear to have sympathy for those who are disturbed when the independent status of religion is questioned (2012, 369):

An even more serious accusation is that studies which adopt social perspectives on religion run the risk of actually denying the reality or truth of religion by implying that religion represents nothing but the social and is merely an epiphenomenon of social life, not an independent realm of reality itself.

Philosophically, the *sui generis* position is, argues Cho and Squier (2013), the unfortunate consequence of attempts in the study of religion to avoid on the one hand relativism and on the other absolutism. It leads, as Cho and Squier note when referring to Geertz (2000, 75), to the understanding of religions as passengers of one train, often briefly and inadequately, glimpsing those on another train, but travelling in the opposite direction. Instead, Cho and Squier take up Geertz' desire for religions to be placed within systems, rather than treated as isolated cases. For, where there are trains, there must be stations.

The findings of this research have broadly placed congregations within Giddens theory of structuration. In doing so, it is hoped that their structural properties, such as personal networks and meso-level network integration can be considered as part of, as Cho and Squier argue, a dynamic and complex system (2013).

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